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AUTHOR Banks, James A.
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ABSTRACT

This paper delineates a process of rational decision-making and social action. To make a rational decision, the social actor must use concepts, generalizations and theories from the social sciences, knowledge which has high predictive value, and knowledge which constitutes the structures of the social science disciplines. He must also identify, form and clarify his values, as well as consider alternative values and their consequences. When a social actor acts intelligently to influence public policy, he has mastered knowledge related to the issue, clarified his values regarding it, and is acutely aware of the possible consequences of his actions and is willing to accept them. Action which does not satisfy these criteria is irrational. Thus, to keep our highly divided society from destructive polarization and total dehumaniziation, we must train students to act rationally to shape public policy. Since the school is a social institution with problems which mirror those of the larger society, students can be provided much practice in shaping public policy by working to eliminate problems in their classroom, school or school system. (Author/AWW)

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# DECISION-MAKING AND SOCIAL ACTION IN THE SOCIAL STUDIES*

James A. Banks
Associate Professor of Education
University of Washington, Seattle

As we move into the last decades of the twentieth century, our nation is witwitnessing technological advancements which are unparalled in human history, yet is faced with social problems of such as immense magnitude that they pose a serious threat to the ideals of American democracy and to man's survival. Racial conflict and polarization, environmental pollution, the increasing gap between the rich and the poor, widespread alienation among our youths, international hostilities, and perhaps most serious, man's inhumanity to his fellowman, are some of the salient problems which America faces on the threshold of the twenty-first century. No sensitive observer of contemporary American society can deny the seriousness of our current social problems and the tremendous strains on our social system.

The social studies must help students to develop the ability to make sound personal and public decisions if man is to be saved from self-destruction and chaos. The main goal of the social studies should be to help students develop the ability to make rational decisions so that they can resolve personal problems and through social action, influence public policy and develop a sense of political efficacy. My beliefs about the proper goal of the social studies is based on the assumption that man will always face personal and social problems, and that all citizens should participate in the making of public policy in a democratic society. The focus for the social studies which I recommend is not only grounded in the democratic ideology, but one of its basic assumptions is that maximum participation of citizens in the making of public policy is essential for the perpetuation of a free and open society. The theory rejects the idea that public authorities or academic specialists should determine the goals of social institutions. Their proper role is to facilitate the realization of the goals and values shaped by the wider populace.

I am also assuming that individuals are not born with the ability to make rational decisions, but that decision-making consists of a set of skills which can be

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identified and systematically taught. I am also assuming that man can both identify and clarify his values, and that he can be trained to reflect upon problems before acting on them.

I have suggested that students should not only become decision-makers, but that they should develop the ability to make rational decisions. An important question which I have a responsibility to answer is: "How do I distinguish between a rational and an irrational decision?" or "What criteria do I use to evaluate the rationality of a decision?" In this paper, I am going to delineate a process with definite steps and attributes which a decision-maker must satisfy before I am willing to call his decisions and actions rational. It is extremely important for the reader to realize that I am primarily concerned with a process of decision-making, and not with specific products of decisions. The careful listener may raise several legitimate questions about my position and wonder about the consequences for a society in which individuals are free to make uncoerced decisions. Such individuals may, for example, violate essential societal mores and laws. In principle, a social actor who reached a decision using the process which I will spell out below may decide to murder all of his enemies. This possibility forces me to make explicit other assumptions on which my beliefs about the social studies are based. I am assuming that social actors who make decisions using the process which I advocate will act in ways which are consistent with major societal mores, goals and values. I believe that most persons who habitually violate norms and mores do so primarily because they act before rationally reflecting upon the possible consequences of their actions. Most such actions, I believe, are impetuous, spontaneous, impulsive and irrational. While my position assumes that rational decision-makers will act in ways consistent with the values and mores of their society, it is not a theory which does not advocate social change. It also assumes that if the social actors within a society use the process which I will describe to reach decisions, societal goals, values and mores will be changed by intelligent social action when they no longer contribute to the satisfaction of human needs and aspirations, or when they no longer meet the current needs of society. When goals and values become obsolete and dynfunctional, the public, through massive and effective social action, will construct new goals and values which are more consistent with current needs, purposes and beliefs.

Thus I feel that the social studies curriculum which I advocate will prevent chaos and destructive instability within a society, while at the same time providing

means and methods whereby new generations can shape their own destinies, use those aspects of traditional society which are consistent with their needs, and create new, legitimate life-styles and values when it is necessary to do so. What is legitimate, normal and valued is subject to reconstruction in each new generation. Each generation, however, can use those aspects of the past which are functional for current needs and purposes. Thus our theory advocates both stability and change within a society.

Criteria for Rational Decision Making and Social Action

Decision-making by our definition, consists of several components, including the derivation of knowledge, prediction, value analysis and clarification, the synthesis of knowledge and values, and the affirmation of a course of action. While all decisions consist of knowledge, valuing and prediction components, rational decisions, as I use the term, must satisfy other requirements. There are many kinds of knowledge and ways of attaining it. To make a rational decision, the decision-maker must use the scientific method to attain knowledge. The knowledge must not only be scientific; it must be broad or interdisciplinary and cut across disciplinary lines. Knowledge from any one discipline is insuffieient to help us make intelligent decisions. To make intelligent decisions regarding issues such as poverty, racism or war, the social actor must view these problems from the perspectives of several disciplines such as sociology, economics, political science and history. The perspective of any one discipline is too limited to guide intelligent decision-making and rational social action.

The knowledge on which rational decisions are made must also be powerful and widely applicable so that it will enable the decision-maker to make the most accurate predictions possible. There are several categories of knowledge and they vary in their predictive capacity and in their ability to help us to organize our observations. Factual knowledge, which consists of specific statements about limited phenomena, is the lowest level of knowledge, and has the least predictive capacity. Concepts are words or phrases which enable us to categorize or classify a large class of observations, and thus to reduce the complexity of our social environment. Because of their structure and function, concepts in and of themselves do not possess predictive value. However, generalizations, which state the relationships between concepts or variables, enable us to predict behavior; the predictive capacity of generalizations vary directly with their degree of applicability and amount of empirical support. Generalizations

FIGURE 1 ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF RATIONAL DECISION-MAKING AND SOCIAL ACTION

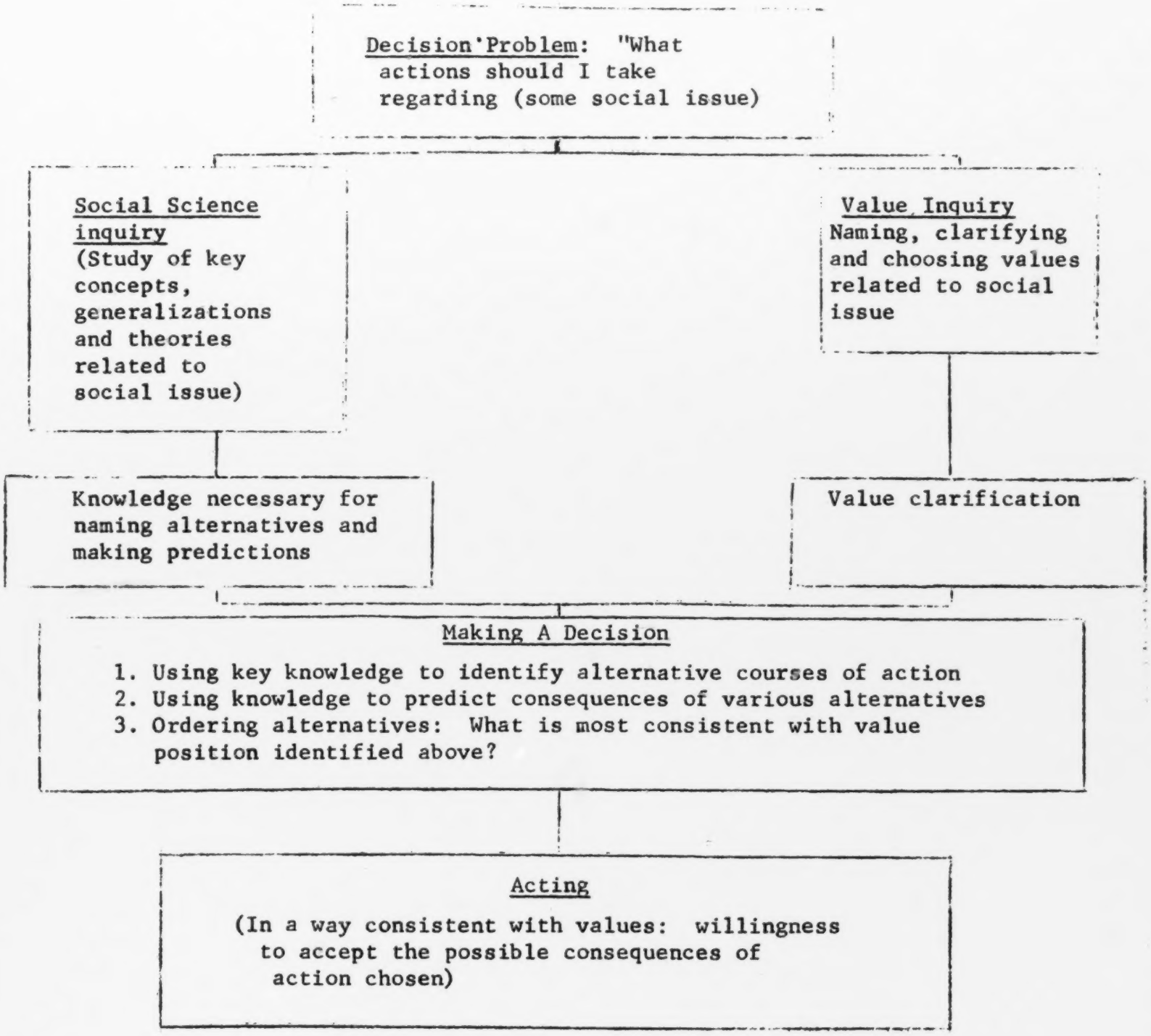

Decision Problem: "What actions should I take regarding (some social issue)
Social Science inquiry (Study of key concepts, generalizations and theories related to social issue)
Value Inquiry Naming, clarifying and choosing values related to social issue
Knowledge necessary for naming alternatives and making predictions
Value clarification
Making A Decision
1. Using key knowledge to identify alternative courses of action
2. Using knowledge to predict consequences of various alternatives
3. Ordering alternatives: What is most consistent with value position identified above?
Acting
(In a way consistent with values: willingness to accept the possible consequences of action chosen)

Figure 2 THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE CATEGORIES OF KNOWLEDGE

THEORY: Durkheim's Theory of Suicide

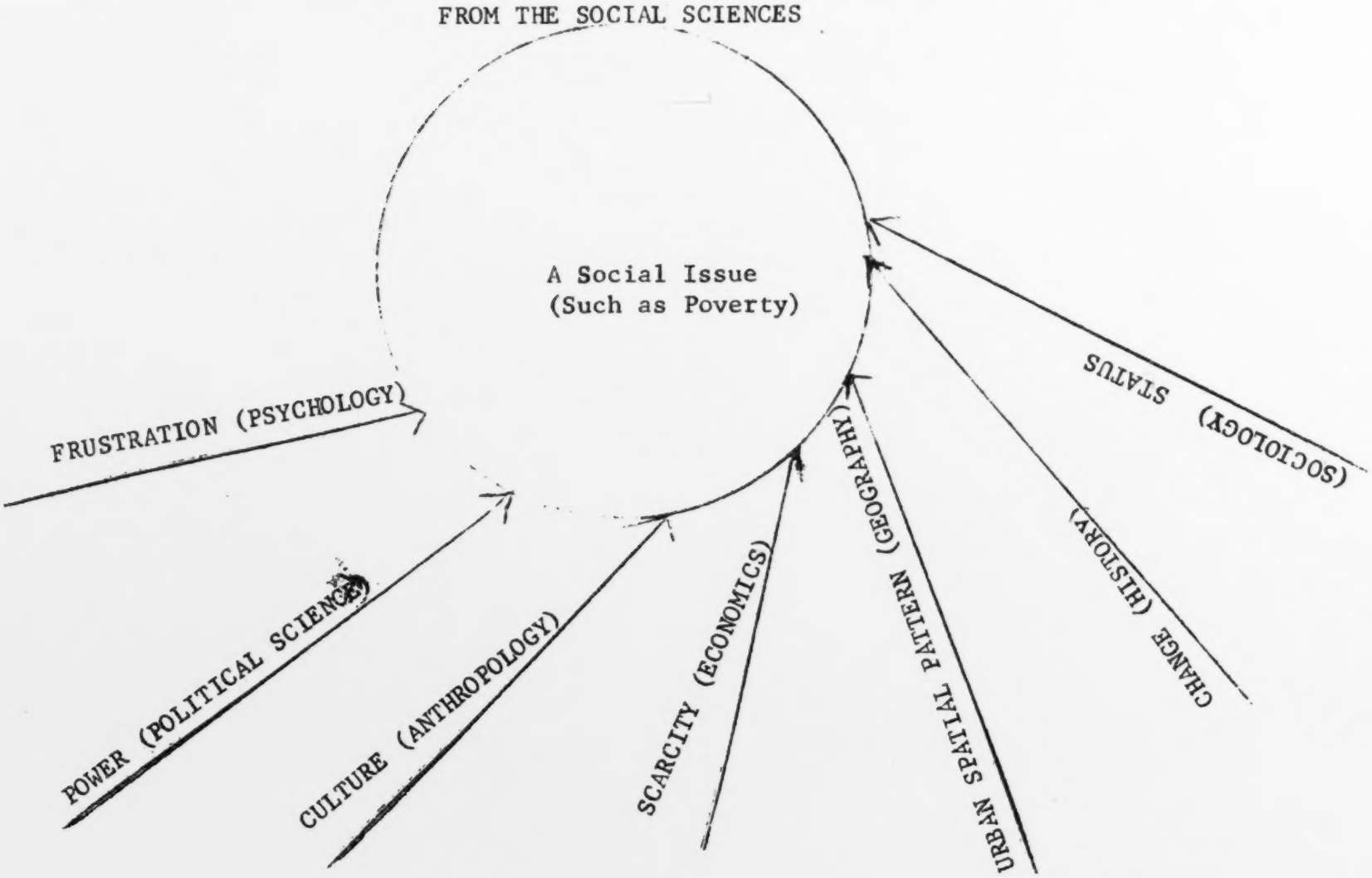
GENERALIZATION: In any social grouping, the suicide rate varies directly with the degree of individualism.

CONCEPTS: Suicide Rate, Individualism

FACT: Only 7.6 persons per 100,000 committed suicide in Spain in 1965, compared to 16.3 per 100,000 in the United States.

This figure illustrates the relationship between facts, concepts, generalizations and theories. Theory is the highest form of knowledge and is thus the most useful for making predictions and decisions.

Figure 3 UNDERSTANDING A SOCIAL ISSUE WITH CONCEPTS AND THEORIES FROM THE SOCIAL SCIENCES




This figure illustrates how a social issue such as poverty can be sufficiently understood only by viewing it with the concepts and theories from a number of social science disciplines. Any one discipline gives only a partial understanding of a social problem.

which describe a large class of behavior and which have been widely verified are the most useful for making predictions. Theory is the highest form of knowledge, and is the most useful for predictive purposes. A theory consists of a deductive system of logically interrelated generalizations. Although no grand or all-inclusive theories exist in the social sciences as in the physical sciences, numerous partial or middle range social science theories exist, such as Durkheim's theory of suicide and Rose's theory of prejudice.

To make rational decisions, the student must be able to use the scientific method to derive higher level generalizations and theories, since these forms of knowledge will enable him to make the most accurate predictions. The most predictive generalizations and theories are those which are related to the key or organizing concepts of the social science disciplines. The identification of key concepts within the social sciences enables the decision-maker to use the most powerful generalizations which constitute the behavioral sciences, and which can make the greatest contribution to the resolution of personal and social problems, and facilitate the influencing of public policy.

Rational decisions have a valuing as well as a knowledge component. However, value teaching for rational decision-making, like knowledge mastery, must have definite characteristics. Educators use a wide variety of approaches to value education. These include the indoctrination of what adults consider the "correct" values, the repression or superficial treatment of value laden issues, and the teaching of values by examples. These approaches to value education do not help students to make rational decisions. To make rational or intelligent decisions, the social actor must be taught a process for deriving, clarifying and reflecting upon the consequences of his values within an uncoerced classroom atmosphere. Only when a decision-maker is acutely aware of his values and their consequences, and is willing to accept those consequences, can he make a rational decision and act intelligently to resolve personal problems and to shape public policy. Figure 1 summarizes the essential components of rational decision-making as defined in this paper. Figure 2 shows the categories of knowledge-and suggests that theoretical knowledge best facilitates the making of sound decisions, and the planning of effective courses of social action. Figure 3 illustrates how perspectives from many disciplines are necessary to help the social actor to understand social issues and to determine successful ways to influence policy related to them.

Providing Opportunities for Social Action

After students have made decisions on important social issues, we should, whenever possible and practical, provide opportunities for them to participate in social action projects to implement the decisions which they have made so that they can resolve social problems, and develop a sense of political efficacy. Knowledge is of little value if it is not used to help solve human problems in a period of our history when personal and social problems loom large. While the teacher and the school will not be able to provide opportunities for students to act on all or perhaps most of the decisions which they make in class (this would be neither possible nor desirable), the school, by working cooperatively with other public and private agencies, can provide opportunities for students to act on many decisions and issues which are important to them.

Since the school is a social institution with problems which mirror those of the larger society, students can be provided much practice in shaping public policy by working to eliminate problems in their classroom, school or school system. They might start by studying and analyzing the problems within their classroom. To help students to develop a sense of political efficacy by working to resolve social problems within the school, the teachers and administrators must be committed to the belief that students must be active participants in the making of school and other public policies. Students who lack political effectiveness in their own classroom and school will be ineffective in shaping public policy in the wider community. The nature and extent of students' involvement in school policy should be determined by the nature of the social issue, and the maturity and knowledge which the students have about the issue.

Summary

In this paper, we delineated a process of rational decision-making and social action. To make a rational decision, the social actor must use concepts, generalizations and theories from the social sciences, knowledge which has high predictive value, and knowledge which constitutes the structures of the social science disciplines. He must also identify, form and clarify his values, as well as consider alternative values and their consequences. When a social actor acts intelligently to influence public policy, he has mastered knowledge related to the issue, clarified his values regarding it, and is acutely aware of the possible consequences of his actions and is willing to accept them. Action which does not satisfy these criteria is irrational.To save our highly divided society from destructive polarization and total dehumanization, we must train students to act rationally to shape public policy. This immense task presents a major challenge to social studies educators in the decades ahead.

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